XV WORLD FORESTRY CONGRESS

2–6 May 2022 | Coex, Seoul, Republic of Korea

BUILDING A GREEN, HEALTHY AND RESILIENT FUTURE WITH FORESTS

At the XV World Forestry Congress, the world's largest gathering on forests, stakeholders urge immediate action

Korea Forest Service

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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BACKGROUND

The first-ever hybrid World Forestry Congress, at which participants from 160 countries met in person and virtually, was held on 2–6 May 2022 in Seoul, the Republic of Korea. It was co-organized by the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Centred on the theme of building a green, healthy and resilient future with forests, the Congress was convened against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected people, forests and forestry worldwide. After a week of rich discussions in ministerial dialogues, technical sessions under six sub-themes and numerous special and plenary events, participants endorsed the Seoul Forest Declaration and about 150 “action points” – steps that need to be taken to solve challenges and seize opportunities. These outcomes were complemented by the Youth Call for Action and the Ministerial Call on Sustainable Wood.

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THERE IS NO TIME TO LOSE: WE NEED TO ACT NOW!

Despite global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Global Goals on Forests deforestation and forest degradation continue at alarming rates. Although the deforestation rate has declined globally in recent decades, according to the FRA remote sensing survey the world still lost 7.8 million hectares of forest – equivalent to the area of Serbia – per year between 2010–2018. Most of these were tropical forests. The main drivers causing almost 90% of deforestation worldwide were cropland expansion and livestock grazing.

Continued deforestation and forest degradation will have disastrous consequences for biodiversity, climate change, water availability and many other crucial ecosystem services. Through their commitments to the Rio Conventions and the SDGs, countries have pledged to restore 1 billion hectares of degraded land, but progress in implementing this pledge is too slow.

With only eight years left to achieve the SDGs and the urgent need to keep global warming below 1.5 °C, we cannot afford to lose more time. The strong message from the Congress is that action must be taken now to accelerate and scale up progress towards global commitments on forests. Although action is needed on all fronts, the Congress prioritized the following six key areas.

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FORESTS WITHOUT BOUNDARIES – A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Forests transcend political, social and environmental boundaries. They are essential components of land-use mosaics and vital for the food, water and energy security of billions of people. They also play crucial roles in the carbon cycle, biodiversity conservation and human health. Therefore, they are the concern not only of foresters but also of sectors such as agriculture, energy, water, social services, health and conservation.

- As society evolves, the forest sector and the scope of forestry must adapt by strengthening linkages with other land uses and sectors. Integrated landscape management approaches are required that encompass the full range of goods and services offered by forests, their social and cultural values and their contributions to agrifood systems and energy supply.
- Responsibility for forests must be shared and integrated across institutions, sectors and stakeholders. For this, multisectoral institutional mechanisms at local to national levels should be established or strengthened and administrative boundaries removed.
- Coordination, collaboration and transparent and accountable partnerships at all levels are needed to achieve global targets on climate change, biodiversity, forest and landscape restoration and sustainable forest management. This requires, among others, a much greater involvement of young people and women in decision-making.
- The interests, concerns and rights of forest-dependent people, particularly Indigenous Peoples and local communities, deserve special attention because they are the stewards of the forests. The needs and concerns of urban people and other stakeholders must also be heeded – their well-being depends on healthy and productive forests as well, albeit more indirectly.

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF TURNING THE TIDE ON DEFORESTATION AND FOREST DEGRADATION

Nature-based solutions, such as sustainable forest management, forest restoration and halting deforestation, can cost-effectively provide up to one-third of the climate-change mitigation needed by 2030. They can also play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity and increasing the adaptive capacity and resilience of people and forests.

Given ongoing deforestation globally and the vast areas of degraded land requiring restoration, the time to act is now. In the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, commitments on paper must be turned into ambitious action on the ground and finance at scale. Halting deforestation requires addressing its drivers. Transforming agrifood systems – food production and consumption – is key.

- Halting deforestation, restoring forests, and sustainably managing forests must be part of the mix for scaling up ambitions to achieve the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, the Global Forest Goals, and land degradation neutrality targets.
- Halting deforestation requires robust, comprehensive information on the dynamics that drive forest and land use. The rights and capacity of stakeholders to generate, access and use data – including socio-economic data on underlying drivers – must be strengthened.
- Transforming agrifood systems requires coherence across environmental and economic policies and greater stakeholder and cross-sectoral cooperation. The transformation should be accelerated by demand- and supply-side measures linked to agricultural production, trade and consumption.
- Forests must be sustainably managed as it is more cost-effective to avoid deforestation and forest degradation than to restore degraded lands. Sustainable forest management needs to be supported by robust, inclusive and transparent verification and certification systems to ensure the legal and sustainable production and trade of agricultural commodities, including wood.
- Ecosystem restoration must combine science and local knowledge, including traditional knowledge. A harmonized monitoring and reporting framework for restoration is required to measure progress towards agreed commitments.
- Governments should exercise their responsibility for leading restoration by providing an enabling environment and by empowering local people, supporting them with incentives, and ensuring that they benefit.
- The frequency, severity and extent of wildfires are increasing due to climate change and human pressure on forest lands. This challenge must be tackled at all levels, including through strategic fire management, detection, prevention and suppression, coordinated approaches, research, and international cooperation.

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3 RESILIENT ECONOMIES, INNOVATIVE FINANCE AND INVESTMENT SAVE FORESTS

There is no healthy economy on an unhealthy planet. Forest-based circular bioeconomies will be resilient, facilitate sustainable production and consumption, and provide green jobs in the forest sector, including for women and young people. At a global scale and often locally, investment in sustainable forestry is far short of what is needed, and access to finance is especially challenging for small forest producers and rural women. “Greening finance” and “financing green” are two sides of the same coin, approaches that must be further developed through innovative mechanisms that direct capital flows to forest assets.

- Moving towards a circular bioeconomy will result in growing demand for forest products. This will require the more efficient use of existing forest resources and an expansion of the resource base including through sustainable plantations and agroforestry.
- Decent work and green jobs in forestry in the context of a circular bioeconomy require coherent and effective laws, regulations and policies aligned with international labour standards that are duly implemented, as well as greater capacity at all levels to develop the required skills and to ensure safe workplaces.
- Forest restoration pledges must be turned into real financial flows, and investment in forest and landscape restoration globally must at least triple by 2030. Forest carbon finance through results-based REDD payments and carbon markets has significant potential but requires higher carbon prices to compensate for the cost of restoration.
- Promising models such as blended finance should be used to catalyse private-sector investment at the scale required for effective forest restoration and conservation, as well as afforestation and reforestation. Applying innovative financial mechanisms such as green bonds, crowdfunding, innovation hubs, and collaboration with insurance companies to forests requires measures to reduce investment risk and to provide secure land tenure, and adequate forest information.
- The coming together of smallholders and family farmers in forest and farm producer organizations (FFPOs) is essential for improving access to markets and finance. Banks and investors must strengthen their ability to meet the needs of FFPOs, including by addressing risk in forestry, agroforestry and agriculture, and FFPOs must improve their financial literacy and their role in financial intermediation.

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MINISTERIAL FORUM ON FOREST FINANCE

The Ministerial Forum on Forest Finance agreed that a large funding gap exists between what is needed to implement global commitments on forests and what is available, and that both public and private investment must be scaled up. Innovative and sustainable financing options exist, but more effort is needed to improve access to global climate- and environment-based funds for those countries most in need. Policies must change to divert financial flows away from actions that harm forests and to incentivize investment in conservation, restoration and sustainable use.

Advances are needed on multiple fronts, from the broader use of financial instruments such as blended finance to building robust portfolios of bankable projects and developing appropriate financing vehicles. Transitioning to higher-value forest economies and jobs anchored in conservation and sustainable use will require a solid enabling environment to attract conventional investment in the right areas as well as taking advantage of emerging carbon finance mechanisms.

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WOOD – AN ANCIENT RAW MATERIAL TAKING US INTO THE FUTURE

Wood has been a vital resource for thousands of years, and it has an important role to play in a sustainable future. Wood is renewable, climate-friendly, versatile and recyclable. It has the potential to transform the building sector, provide sustainable renewable energy, and help us move towards a circular bioeconomy and climate neutrality. Technological innovation is giving rise to exciting new wood products that can replace non-renewable materials – anything made from petroleum can also be made from trees.

- There is a need to raise global awareness of wood as a nature-based solution and to convince consumers that "wood is good". Global communication campaigns – such as the "Grow the Solution. Wood, Nature's Sustainable Solution", proposed at the Congress – will be essential for achieving this.
- The cities of the future will need to be better integrated with nature, both in design and materials used. Architects should turn to wood and other renewable materials – preferably produced locally – and adapt designs accordingly to create more eco-friendly buildings. Appropriate policies and building regulations are needed to facilitate this. Forest-rich developing countries require technical support and investment to establish processing industries and develop the capacity to produce modern timber products suitable for such construction.
- Research, development and innovations are required to support the transition to a circular bioeconomy through new wood-based materials, manufacturing methods and services, and to ensure resource-use efficiency and full recyclability.
- To achieve climate goals, there is an urgent need to accelerate the energy transition to renewables. Wood-energy production and use must become more sustainable and efficient. A comprehensive policy and regulatory framework is needed that includes coordinated planning across the energy and forest sectors and the adoption of complementary renewable energy sources to reduce pressure on forests.
- Increasing local economic resilience requires strengthening the capacity of smallholders, forest communities and small and medium-sized enterprises to participate in sustainable wood value chains, including through certification.

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MINISTERIAL CALL ON SUSTAINABLE WOOD

Convinced that mobilizing the full potential of sustainable wood will enable the world to build more carbon-neutral and resilient economies and progress towards more sustainable societies, Ministers at the Congress called for the scaling-up of sustainable wood-based pathways to:

- address the lack of awareness of the potential of such pathways;
- enhance global and regional policy dialogues on wood-based pathways and related synergies and trade-offs and ways to strengthen investments;
- improve modalities to promote technical exchanges and the sharing of experiences and learning as a means for driving innovations in sustainable forest management, efficient wood value chains and sustainable wood use; and
- significantly increase the use of sustainable wood-based solutions within countries' nationally determined contributions by 2030.

The Ministers committed to joining forces to promote policy and technical dialogues and exchanges among wood producer and consumer countries and stakeholders to develop momentum and the necessary actions at scale. They invited FAO and other members of the Collaborative Partnership of Forests to support these efforts.

Read the Ministerial Call on Sustainable Wood here.

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FORESTS FOR HUMAN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of forests and trees for human health and well-being in both rural and urban areas. Sustainably managed forests offer multiple physical, psychological and spiritual health benefits. They are also sources of medicines, contribute to food security by boosting the resilience of food systems, and can be means for inclusive rural development. Forests often serve as vital safety nets during disasters and conflicts and are important for livelihoods and income in post-conflict areas and during peace-building.

- Forests can help people recover from the stress and depression caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to cope better with future pandemics. This requires establishing synergetic relationships between people and ecosystems and promoting holistic and integrated policies and programmes for human and animal health by adopting a One Health approach.
- Evidence worldwide shows that forest medicine and practices such as forest bathing, forest therapy and forest healing yield enormous health benefits for societies. These should be promoted through collaboration and policy integration across the health and forest sectors, sharing of data, knowledge and information, and capacity development.
- Urban forests and other green areas should be integral to all aspects of urban planning because they buffer noise, provide cleaner air, reduce the urban heat-island effect and provide green space for exercise and recreation.
- Local communities, Indigenous Peoples and other forest-dependent people have strong ties with forests, which are key components of their livelihoods, health, well-being and cultures. Their traditional knowledge and best practices should be used in forest management and restoration, and their tenure and use rights should be guaranteed.
- Initiatives such as forest and landscape restoration and establishing forest peace parks in internal or cross-border conflict areas should be considered as means for assisting peace and reconciliation processes.

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ACCURATE, ACCESSIBLE AND UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION – A KEY REQUISITE FOR ACHIEVING FOREST OBJECTIVES

Knowledge and information on forests are needed for effective climate action, halting deforestation and conserving, sustainably managing and restoring forest ecosystems. The Framework for Ecosystem Restoration Monitoring launched at the Congress represents significant methodological progress towards a harmonized monitoring and reporting framework for forest restoration. Accurate and timely forest information is also the basis for effective policy development and for shaping the public image of forests and forest management.

- Increasing the transparency of forest data collection, analysis and dissemination is a fundamental requirement for implementing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and for performance-based climate-change mitigation schemes. The provision of free access to very-high-resolution datasets as global public goods should be encouraged and expanded. Appropriate computing infrastructure is also required.
- Field-based data collection requires ongoing support to obtain accurate information on biophysical attributes and social and economic aspects of forests and to validate remote-sensing-based models and products.
- Effective forest monitoring requires innovative and accessible technologies as well as capacity development at all levels. Forest monitoring and research programmes should be developed and implemented inclusively to meet the data and information requirements of policymakers and to assist the development of coherent, evidence-based policies.
- Forest communication and education at all levels should be based on up-to-date data and information that should be accessible to communicators and educators, enabling them to shape the public image of forests and provide students with the knowledge base they need to become effective forest managers and decision-makers.

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WHAT IS NEEDED TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION

INCLUSIVENESS, COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for leaving no one behind. This means that actions must be inclusive of the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders, particularly local communities, smallholders, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth. Their rights must be respected, and they must be empowered to be active agents of change and to receive equitable shares of the benefits. The millions of small-scale forest and farm producers that constitute a large part of the private forest sector must have a stronger voice in decision-making on issues affecting them. They require secure land tenure, capacity development, access to finance and markets and strong representative bodies.

Investing in youth is also essential. Young people – the forest custodians of the future – are ready and willing to engage.

Effective implementation also requires more collaboration among stakeholders and across sectors. Multisectoral coordination mechanisms are needed to break down sectoral silos. Engaging with the corporate private sector through public–private partnerships can result in win–wins and will open up new avenues for innovative finance.

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YOUTH CALL FOR ACTION

Young people at the Congress called on governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the scientific community, academia and the private sector to enable youth to unlock their potential in the forest sector. They invited these actors to work with young people to:

- ensure inclusive and equitable access to high-quality forest education and training for youth everywhere by improving training and education programmes and expanding scholarships;
- ensure decent work and career development by promoting youth entrepreneurship in the forest sector and providing mentorship as well as opportunities for apprenticeship and career development;
- achieve gender equality and empower young women in the forest sector through gender-inclusive practices in recruitment and selection processes, by promoting women's leadership in decision-making, and by providing field training for female teams as well as gender training in the workplace; and
- ensure political participation and representation in the forest sector by inviting youth onto boards, advisory committees and task forces, making youth part of quorums in decision-making, and including youth in all stages of programmes and projects that may affect them.

Read Work with Us – Youth Call for Action here.

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COMMUNICATION, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Better communication of the benefits of sustainably managed forests and trees and their role in moving towards a greener, healthier and more resilient future will sensitize decision-makers and help shift public perceptions on forests. Increasing awareness and understanding of forests requires more investment to develop the capacity of forest communicators and to put in place effective communication campaigns for specific target groups.

In an increasingly urbanized world, forest education should be broadened to involve all age groups. It is vital that children are educated on the functions of forests and grow up with a sound understanding of the importance of forests for people and the planet.

Research must address the issues highlighted at the Congress and provide the scientific knowledge that is necessary for effective implementation. Landscape management, agroforestry, the restoration of degraded lands, improving human health through forests and developing innovative wood-based products to replace fossil materials all require research that extends beyond the forest sector, making collaboration essential across research areas and among research institutions.

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OUTREACH TO INTERNATIONAL PROCESSES AND FORA

The XV World Forestry Congress, and especially the Seoul Forest Declaration and the “action points”, has strong messages from forest stakeholders worldwide on what needs to be done to build a green, healthy and resilient future for all. It is vital that these messages are heeded in decisions on the future of the planet. Global policy processes including the Conferences of the Parties to the Rio Conventions, the FAO Committee on Forestry and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development should fully incorporate these messages in their deliberations and outcomes.

HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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